

Beaufort chamber hires lobbyist to help new jets land at air station

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The Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce is stepping up its efforts to guarantee the military's newest fighter jet lands at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort.

Carlotta Ungaro, chamber president and CEO, said she will finalize a \$70,000 deal next month with The Rhoades Group, a Washington, D.C. lobbying group, to help sway Navy officials deciding how to divvy up 13 new Marine Corps Joint Strike Fighter squadrons between MCAS Beaufort and MCAS Cherry Point, N.C.

A Navy report released Wednesday recommended basing three active-squadrons and two pilot training squadrons at MCAS Beaufort and eight active-duty squadrons at MCAS Cherry Point.

Until the report is finalized and the Navy makes its final decision later this year, Ungaro said the chamber is not taking any chances.

"In this political climate, I don't take anything for granted," Ungaro said.

The chamber's lobbying push comes about a month after an economic impact report prepared for the N.C. Eastern Region Development Commission recommended Cherry Point house 11 of the 13 squadrons.

Officials near Cherry Point said this week they were pleased with the report's recommendation but will continue to lobby for all of the active-duty squadrons, each of which has an estimated economic impact of \$30 million to \$35 million.

"I'm a greedy sort. I would have preferred 11," Havelock (N.C.) Mayor Jimmy Sanders told the New Bern (N.C.) Sun-Journal. "We're still going to work on 11, but eight is good."

U.S. Rep. **Joe Wilson**, R-SC, said he would work to ensure Beaufort gets its fair share of the 13 squadrons.

"Beaufort is an ideal spot for F-35 Squadrons," Wilson said in an e-mail. "I remain optimistic we will have the 'Sound of Freedom' in our great community."

If MCAS Beaufort received only the two training squadrons, more than 1,200 fewer Marines would be stationed at the base, a 26 percent workforce reduction that would result in the loss of \$48.6 million in annual payroll income.

Kim Statler, executive director of the Lowcountry Economic Network, said such a decision could be damaging to the base's future.

"If we lose squadrons and we lose planes, what will it be like the next time we go through (the Defense) Base Closure and Realignment Commission?" Statler said.

Ungaro said \$50,000 of the \$70,000 will come from funds leftover from when the chamber hired The Rhoades Group to lobby against the closure of Beaufort's military bases in 2005.

Ungaro added she also hopes to solicit funds from Beaufort County and other county municipalities to pay for a public relations campaign aimed at emphasizing the base's importance to the county's overall economic health.

According to a study released this month, MCAS Beaufort has an annual economic impact of \$615 million.

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